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U.S. Says It Has Stepped Up Cooperation with Mexico Against Crime

Washington — Thanks to mechanisms and practices put in place by the Mérida Initiative, the United States can accelerate the implementation of its security assistance to Mexico and other countries in the fight against transnational criminal organizations, a senior Obama administration official says.

The announcement comes ahead of Mexican President Felipe Calderón's March 3 meeting with President Obama in Washington.

The official, who asked not to be identified, told reporters March 2 that when the Mexican leader previously visited Washington in May 2010, approximately \$230 million of the \$1.5 billion multiyear security-assistance package had been implemented.

"Today, we're north of \$400 million worth of implementation," the official said. "A number of helicopter deliveries were moved forward ... as a result of the last visit, and we have now had capacity-building programs reach more than 72,000 individuals in Mexico."

The initiative, launched in 2008, is designed to enhance the efforts of the United States, Mexico, and several Central American nations to halt drug trafficking and cross-border organized crime, with a significant portion focused on the training and equipping of security forces.

An additional \$500 million of funding for the program is expected during 2011, and the official said the United States is committed to doubling the implementation rate of the Mérida Initiative through the delivery of more equipment, and particularly through the "intensification of capacity-building programs and training."

"By the end of calendar year 2011, in terms of Mérida implementation, we expect to be at ... roughly \$900 million overall," the official said.

The acceleration of the program is partly due to changes in security cooperation that came as a result of creating facilitative "mechanisms and the practices" in both the United States and Mexico during its first years of implementation.

"Under Mérida we have mechanisms in place that we simply didn't have two years ago that allow us to implement more quickly. We now have the mechanisms in place and we can utilize those mechanisms to deliver the assistance," the official said.

"The acceleration doesn't mean we're being less careful. It

means we're ... ensuring that we're utilizing assistance in a manner most effective and as intended by [the U.S.] Congress," the official said.

The official said since Calderón's May 2010 visit, "Mexico has had very important successes against senior-level cartel officials [and] individuals," including operations it has conducted in cooperation with the United States.

Obama and Calderón plan to discuss "ramped-up efforts" to cut off the flow of illegal weapons to Mexico from the United States and ways to reduce the U.S. demand for illegal drugs, he said.

The official also said weapons seizures by U.S. government agencies are now "at record levels," with recent high-level prosecutions in the southwestern United States related to weapons trafficking.

Obama will ensure continued cooperation with Mexico beyond the three-year commitment to Mérida that he made to Calderón in August 2009, the official said.

The training of Mexican security forces is "a very important part of the way forward in enhancing, deepening and continuing security cooperation with the various parts of the Mexican federal government that are engaged in this effort."

U.S. Uses "Heavy Muscle" in Hunt for New Zealand Quake Survivors

By Charlene Porter
Staff Writer

Washington — When you hope to find survivors in the rubble and debris of an earthquake-stricken city, you call up the world's "heavy muscle."

After the February 22 earthquake in Christchurch, New Zealand, officials called on the international community for help. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) called the Los Angeles County Urban Search and Rescue team for the assignment. When the unit leaves California for an international disaster it's known as USA 2, and within about 30 hours, the 74-member unit and all its equipment were flying across the Pacific. They're known as a "heavy" team, one of just a handful in the world.

"That means you have the capability of working through reinforced concrete and steel buildings, like you would see in a collapsed high-rise or a collapsed parking structure," explained Los Angeles County Fire Department Battalion Chief Larry Collins. "It means you bring in heavy jackhammers, heavy cutting and breaching tools. It's heavy muscle coming in," Collins told *America.gov*.

The death toll from the earthquake stood at 160 late on March 2, with the expectation that the figure would increase as still-unidentified bodies are added to the total. Some 80 people are still unaccounted for, so authorities fear the event will have taken the lives of 240 people, Christchurch residents and international visitors among them.

As the days since the quake pass, the “curve of survivability” is descending, said a second Los Angeles County Fire Department battalion chief, Pat Rohaley. Still, survivors have been found after as many as 13, and even 16, days trapped under rubble in other quake events.

Collins has been working in urban search and rescue (USAR) since the discipline was first defined in the late 1980s. With skills and techniques developed over years, the “heavy” teams work to find people who are “deeply entombed.”

“If there’s someone still alive somewhere in one of those collapsed buildings, they’ll be found,” Collins said.

Rohaley told *America.gov* that one serious challenge for the rescuers in Christchurch is the ground. It keeps shaking.

“We come from California,” Rohaley said, “so we get used to what that feeling is when the ground starts shaking.” The crews are trained to judge the aftershocks and make quick decisions about whether to come off the rubble and retreat to a safer place.

The USA 2 search-and-rescue team will remain in Christchurch until at least next week, Rohaley predicted.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN SEARCH AND RESCUE

Eight international teams are working side by side in Christchurch. Chances are some of these rescuers may have met before — at another earthquake, another landslide, flood, or terrorist attack somewhere in the world. The search-and-rescue teams share an international network created through the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group, which serves as a professional forum and exchange for these emergency-response specialists.

Rohaley says the worldwide USAR network has developed “best practices” on techniques used on a disaster site: stabilizing a collapsing building, the use of search dogs, the use of rope systems for debris removal, etc.

Though many search-and-rescue units exist administratively within fire and emergency response

departments, their specialties include more than firefighting. Structural engineers, emergency medicine physicians, paramedics, canine handlers and others bring a broad portfolio of skills to a disaster site.

Collins calls the Los Angeles unit an “all-risk rescue team,” prepared for a wide array of disasters. Collins himself last was deployed to Haiti after the 2010 earthquake there. Many of those now in Christchurch, he said, were deployed to Sri Lanka after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. The Los Angeles rescuers have also joined the effort to find survivors after major terrorist attacks in the United States.

In any international deployment, Collins said, the California rescuers are making an investment in experience and in good will, and are honored to be doing it. They always remember that they are Los Angelinos, and quakes, wildfires and mudslides are common in their city.

“We know that we may need them all one day,” Collins said.

Peace Corps Marks 50th Anniversary of Service to the World

By Mark Trainer
Staff Writer

Washington — The U.S. Peace Corps started as a simple challenge to American college students to give up two years of their lives to help people in countries in the developing world, and it became a significant humanitarian assistance effort to bring help and hope to the people of 139 nations with more than 200,000 American volunteers.

On March 1, the Peace Corps celebrated 50 years of service to the world.

President John F. Kennedy created the Peace Corps by an executive order, and its first director was R. Sargent Shriver. Over five decades, more than 200,000 volunteers have served 139 host countries.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said March 1 that today “more than 8,600 Peace Corps volunteers from all 50 states serve in 77 countries as community leaders, teachers and mentors. They are united by a desire to create a more peaceful, prosperous world from the ground up.”

The Peace Corps traces its origins to an impromptu campaign speech by then-Senator John F. Kennedy in which he challenged a gathering of students at the University of Michigan to contribute two years of their lives to helping people in the countries of the developing

world. Within weeks of his inauguration in 1961, President Kennedy established the Peace Corps, and on August 30 of that year, the first group of 51 volunteers arrived in Ghana to serve as teachers.

In the years since those first volunteers traveled to Africa, support for the Peace Corps has grown dramatically, with 13,000 applications considered for about 4,000 positions annually. The 2010 fiscal year budget was \$400 million, the agency's largest appropriation from Congress.

The biggest of the Peace Corps' program sectors are education (37 percent) and health and HIV/AIDS (22 percent). The highest percentage of volunteers serves in Africa (37 percent) and Latin America (24 percent). In September 2005, Peace Corps volunteers for the first time were deployed domestically to assist the Federal Emergency Management Agency's relief operations in the Gulf Coast region following hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

The three goals set forth at the organization's founding continue to guide the Peace Corps: helping the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women; helping promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served; and helping promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans.

The commitment required of a Peace Corps volunteer is a 27-month term of service. While the minimum age for volunteers is 18, there is no upper age limit. The average volunteer age is 28, but 7 percent of volunteers are over the age of 50. The eldest current volunteer is an 86-year-old woman serving in Morocco.

"We work with host countries to figure out how to best meet the goals of local communities. We go where we're invited," said Peace Corps Communications Director Allison Price. "We're looking to create sustainable solutions at the community development level. This is really about a people-to-people exchange of ideas."

Technology has transformed the modern Peace Corps. Where the challenge and perhaps appeal of early service in the Peace Corps was 27 months with no promise of communication to family and friends in America, 90 percent of current volunteers have cell phones. Fifty percent have regular access to e-mail.

"It's not just about the one-volunteer experience. It's about them sharing it — not just with their local host community — but with many friends and family," said Price. "The majority of our volunteers are using SMS texting not only to stay in touch with people but also to create new projects in their communities — everything from health education to small income generation."

In a proclamation to honor the Peace Corps on its 50th anniversary, President Obama said, "With each village that now has access to clean water, each young woman who has received an education, and each family empowered to prevent disease because of the service of a Peace Corps Volunteer, President Kennedy's noble vision lives on."

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